

He sat in a small half-darkened booth well over in the corner—the man with the strangely glowing blue-green eyes.

The booth was one of a score that circled the walls of the “Maori Hut,” a popular night club in the San Fernando Valley some five miles over the hills from Hollywood.

It was nearly midnight. Half a dozen couples danced lazily in the central dancing space. Other couples remained tête-à-tête in the secluded booths.

In the entire room only two men were dining alone. One was the slender gray-haired little man with the weirdly glowing eyes. The other was Blair Gordon, a highly successful young attorney of Los Angeles. Both men had the unmistakable air of waiting for someone.

Blair Gordon’s college days were not so far distant that he had yet lost any of the splendid physique that had made him an All-American tackle. In any physical combat with the slight gray-haired stranger, Gordon

knew that he should be able to break the other in two with one hand.

Yet, as he studied the stranger from behind the potted palms that screened his own booth. Gordon was amazed to find himself slowly being overcome by an emotion of dread so intense that it verged upon sheer fear. There was something indescribably alien and utterly sinister in that dimly seen figure in the corner booth.

The faint eery light that glowed in the stranger's deep-set eyes was not the lambent flame seen in the chatoyant orbs of some night-prowling jungle beast. Rather was it the blue-green glow of phosphorescent witch-light that flickers and dances in the night mists above steaming tropical swamps.

The stranger's face was as classically perfect in its rugged outline as that of a Roman war-god, yet those perfect features seemed utterly lifeless. In the twenty minutes that he had been intently watching the stranger, Gordon would have sworn that the other's

face had not moved by so much as the twitch of an eye-lash.

Then a new couple entered the Maori Hut, and Gordon promptly forgot all thought of the puzzlingly alien figure in the corner. The new arrivals were a vibrantly beautiful blond girl and a plump, sallow-faced man in the early forties. The girl was Leah Keith, Hollywood's latest screen sensation. The man was Dave Redding, her director.

A waiter seated Leah and her escort in a booth directly across the room from that of Gordon. It was a maneuver for which Gordon had tipped lavishly when he first came to the Hut.

A week ago Leah Keith's engagement to Blair Gordon had been abruptly ended by a trivial little quarrel that two volatile temperaments had fanned into flames which apparently made reconciliation impossible. A miserably lonely week had finally ended in Gordon's present trip to the Maori Hut. He knew that Leah often came there, and he had an overwhelming

longing to at least see her again, even though his pride forced him to remain unseen.

Now, as he stared glumly at Leah through the palms that effectively screened his own booth, Gordon heartily regretted that he had ever come. The sight of Leah's clear fresh beauty merely made him realize what a fool he had been to let that ridiculous little quarrel come between them.

Then, with a sudden tingling thrill, Gordon realized that he was not the only one in the room who was interested in Leah and her escort.

Over in the half-darkened corner booth the eery stranger was staring at the girl with an intentness that made his weird eyes glow like miniature pools of shimmering blue-green fire. Again Gordon felt that vague impression of dread, as though he were in the presence of something utterly alien to all human experience.

Gordon turned his gaze back to Leah, then caught his breath sharply in sudden amaze. The necklace about

Leah's throat was beginning to glow with the same uncanny blue-green light that shone in the stranger's eyes! Faint, yet unmistakable, the shimmering radiance pulsed from the necklace in an aura of nameless evil.

And with the coming of that aura of weird light at her throat, a strange trance was swiftly sweeping over Leah. She sat there now as rigidly motionless as some exquisite statue of ivory and jet.

Gordon stared at her in stark bewilderment. He knew the history of Leah's necklace. It was merely an oddity, and nothing more—a freak piece of costume jewelry made from fragments of an Arizona meteorite. Leah had worn the necklace a dozen times before, without any trace of the weird phenomena that were now occurring.

Dancers again thronged the floor to the blaring jazz of the negro orchestra while Gordon was still trying to force his whirling brain to a decision. He was certain that Leah was in deadly peril of some kind, yet the

nature of that peril was too bizarre for his mind to imagine.

Then the stranger with the glowing eyes took matters into his own hands. He left his booth and began threading his way through the dancers toward Leah. As he watched the progress of that slight gray-haired figure Gordon refused to believe the evidence of his own eyes. The thing was too utterly absurd—yet Gordon was positive that the strong oak floor of the dancing space was visibly swaying and creaking beneath the stranger's mincing tread!

The stranger paused at Leah's booth only long enough to utter a brief low-voiced command. Then Leah, still in the grip of that strange trance, rose obediently from her seat to accompany him.

Dave Redding rose angrily to intercept her. The stranger seemed to barely brush the irate director with his finger tips, yet Redding reeled back as though struck by a pile-driver. Leah and the stranger started for the door. Redding scrambled to his feet again and hurried after them.

It was then that Gordon finally shook off the stupor of utter bewilderment that had held him. Springing from his booth, he rushed after the trio.

The dancers in his way delayed Gordon momentarily. Leah and the stranger were already gone when he reached the door. The narrow little entrance hallway to the Hut was deserted save for a figure sprawled there on the floor near the outer door.

It was the body of Dave Redding. Gordon shuddered as he glanced briefly down at the huddled figure. A single mighty blow from some unknown weapon had crumpled the director's entire face in, like the shattered shell of a broken egg.

Gordon charged on through the outer door just as a heavy sedan came careening out of the parking lot. He had a flashing glimpse of Leah and the stranger in the front seat of the big car.

Gordon raced for his own machine, a powerful low-slung roadster. A single vicious jab at the starting button, and the big motor leaped into roaring life.

Gordon shot out from the parking lot onto the main boulevard. A hundred yards away the sedan was fleeing toward Hollywood.

Gordon tramped hard on the accelerator. His engine snarled with the unleashed fury of a hundred horsepower. The gap between the two cars swiftly lessened.

Then the stranger seemed to become aware for the first time that he was being followed. The next second the big sedan accelerated with the hurtling speed of a flying bullet. Gordon sent his own foot nearly to the floor. The roadster jumped to eighty miles an hour, yet the sedan continued to leave it remorselessly behind.

The two cars started up the northern slope of Cahuenga Pass with the sedan nearly two hundred yards ahead, and gaining all the time. Gordon wondered briefly if they were to flash down the other side of the Pass and on into Hollywood at their present mad speed.



Then at the summit of the Pass the sedan swerved abruptly to the right and fled west along the Mulholland Highway. Gordon's tires screamed as he swerved the roadster in hot pursuit.

The dark winding mountain highway was nearly deserted at that hour of the night. Save for an occasional automobile that swerved frantically to the side of the road to dodge the roaring onslaught of the racing cars, Gordon and the stranger had the road to themselves.

The stranger seemed no longer to be trying to leave his pursuer hopelessly behind. He allowed Gordon to come within a hundred yards of him. But that was as near as Gordon could get, in spite of the roadster's best efforts.

Half a dozen times Gordon trod savagely upon his accelerator in a desperate attempt to close the gap, but each time the sedan fled with the swift grace of a scudding phantom. Finally Gordon had to content himself with merely keeping his distance behind the glowing red tail-light of the car ahead.

They passed Laurel Canyon, and still the big sedan bored on to the west. Then finally, half a dozen miles beyond Laurel Canyon, the stranger abruptly left the main highway and started up a narrow private road to the crest of one of the lonely hills. Gordon slowly gained in the next two miles. When the road ended in a winding gravelled driveway into the grounds of what was apparently a private estate, the roadster was scarcely a dozen yards behind.

The stranger's features as he stood there stiffly erect in the vivid glare of the roadster's headlights were still as devoid of all expression as ever. The only things that really seemed alive in that masque of a face were the two eyes, glowing eery blue-green fire like twin entities of alien evil.

Gordon wasted no time in verbal sparring. He motioned briefly to Leah Keith's rigid form in the front seat of the sedan.

"Miss Keith is returning to Hollywood with me," he said curtly. "Will you let her go peaceably, or shall I

—?” He left the question unfinished, but its threat was obvious.

“Or shall you do what?” asked the stranger quietly. There was an oddly metallic ring in his low even tones. His words were so precisely clipped that they suggested some origin more mechanical than human.

“Or shall I take Miss Keith with me by force?” Gordon flared angrily.

“You can try to take the lady by force—if you wish.” There was an unmistakable jeering note in the metallic tones.

The taunt was the last thing needed to unleash Gordon’s volatile temper. He stepped forward and swung a hard left hook for that expressionless masque of a face. But the blow never landed. The stranger dodged with uncanny swiftness. His answering gesture seemed merely the gentlest possible push with an outstretched hand, yet Gordon was sent reeling backward a full dozen steps by the terrific force of that apparently gentle blow.

Recovering himself, Gordon grimly returned to the attack. The stranger again flung out one hand in the contemptuous gesture with which one would brush away a troublesome fly, but this time Gordon was more cautious. He neatly dodged the stranger's blow, then swung a vicious right squarely for his adversary's unprotected jaw.

The blow smashed solidly home with all of Gordon's weight behind it. The stranger's jaw buckled and gave beneath that shattering impact. Then abruptly his entire face crumpled into distorted ruin. Gordon staggered back a step in sheer horror at the gruesome result of his blow.

The stranger flung a hand up to his shattered features. When his hand came away again, his whole face came away with it!

Gordon had one horror-stricken glimpse of a featureless blob of rubbery bluish-gray flesh in which fiendish eyes of blue-green fire blazed in malignant fury.

Then the stranger fumbled at his collar, ripping the linen swiftly away. Something lashed out from beneath his throat—a loathsome snake-like object, slender and forked at the end. For one ghastly moment, as the writhing tentacle swung into line with him, Gordon saw its forked ends glow strange fire—one a vivid blue, the other a sparkling green.

Then the world was abruptly blotted out for Blair Gordon.

Consciousness returned to Gordon as swiftly and painlessly as it had left him. For a moment he blinked stupidly in a dazed effort to comprehend the incredible scene before him.

He was seated in a chair over near the wall of a large room that was flooded with livid red light from a single globe overhead. Beside him sat Leah Keith, also staring with dazed eyes in an effort to comprehend her surroundings. Directly in front of them stood a figure of stark nightmare horror.

The weirdly glowing eyes identified the figure as that of the stranger at the Maori Hut, but there every point of resemblance ceased. Only the cleverest of facial masques and body padding could ever have enabled this monstrosity to pass unnoticed in a world of normal human beings.

Now that his disguise was completely stripped away, his slight frame was revealed as a grotesque parody of that of a human being, with arms and legs like pipe-stems, a bald oval head that merged with neckless rigidity directly into a heavy-shouldered body that tapered into an almost wasp-like slenderness at the waist. He was naked save for a loin cloth of some metallic fabric. His bluish-gray skin had a dull oily sheen strangely suggestive of fine grained flexible metal.

The creature's face was hideously unlike anything human. Beneath the glowing eyes was a small circular mouth orifice with a cluster of gill-like appendages on either side of it. Patches of lighter-colored skin on either side of the head seemed to serve as ears. From a point just under the head, where the throat of a

human being would have been, dangled the foot-and-a-half long tentacle whose forked tip had sent Gordon into oblivion.

Behind the creature Gordon was dimly aware of a maze of complicated and utterly unfamiliar apparatus ranged along the opposite wall, giving the room the appearance of being a laboratory of some kind.

Gordon's obvious bewilderment seemed to amuse the bluish-gray monstrosity. "May I introduce myself?" he asked with a mocking note in his metallic voice. "I am Arlok of Xoran. I am an explorer of Space, and more particularly an Opener of Gates. My home is upon Xoran, which is one of the eleven major planets that circle about the giant blue-white sun that your astronomers call Rigel. I am here to open the Gate between your world and mine."

Gordon reached a reassuring hand over to Leah. All memory of their quarrel was obliterated in the face of their present peril. He felt her slender fingers twine firmly with his. The warm contact gave them both new courage.

“We of Xoran need your planet and intend to take possession of it,” Arlok continued, “but the vast distance which separates Rigel from your solar system makes it impracticable to transport any considerable number of our people here in space-cars for, though our space-cars travel with practically the speed of light, it requires over five hundred and forty years for them to cross that great void. So I was sent as a lone pioneer to your Earth to do the work necessary here in order to open the Gate that will enable Xoran to cross the barrier in less than a minute of your time.

“That gate is the one through the fourth dimension, for Xoran and your planet in a four-dimensional universe are almost touching each other in spite of the great distance separating them in a three-dimensional universe. We of Xoran, being three-dimensional creatures like you Earthlings, can not even exist on a four-dimensional plane. But we can, by the use of apparatus to open a Gate, pass through a thin sector of the fourth dimension and emerge in a far distant part of our three-dimensional universe.



“The situation of our two worlds,” Arlok continued, “is somewhat like that of two dots on opposite ends of a long strip of paper that is curved almost into a circle. To two-dimensional beings capable only of realizing and traveling along the two dimensions of the paper itself those dots might be many feet apart, yet in the third dimension straight across free space they might be separated by only the thousandth part of an inch. In order to take that short cut across the third dimension the two-dimensional creatures of the paper would have only to transform a small strip of the intervening space into a two-dimensional surface like their paper.

“They could, do this, of course, by the use of proper vibration-creating machinery, for all things in a material universe are merely a matter of vibration. We of Xoran plan to cross the barrier of the fourth dimension by creating a narrow strip of vibrations powerful enough to exactly match and nullify those of the fourth dimension itself. The result will be that this narrow strip will temporarily become an area of three

dimensions only, an area over which we can safely pass from our world to yours.”

Arlok indicated one of the pieces of apparatus along the opposite wall of the room. It was an intricate arrangement of finely wound coils with wires leading to scores of needle-like points which constantly shimmered and crackled with tiny blue-white flames. Thick cables ran to a bank of concave reflectors of some gleaming grayish metal.

“There is the apparatus which will supply the enormous power necessary to nullify the vibrations of the fourth dimensional barrier,” Arlok explained. “It is a condenser and adapter of the cosmic force that you call the Millikan rays. In Xoran a similar apparatus is already set up and finished, but the Gate can only be opened by simultaneous actions from both sides of the barrier. That is why I was sent on my long journey through space to do the necessary work here. I am now nearly finished. A very few hours more will see the final opening of the Gate. Then the fighting hordes of Xoran can sweep through the barrier and overwhelm your planet.

“When the Gate from Xoran to a new planet is first opened,” Arlok continued, “our scientists always like to have at least one pair of specimens of the new world’s inhabitants sent through to them for experimental use. So to-night, while waiting for one of my final castings to cool, I improved the time by making a brief raid upon the place that you call the Maori Hut. The lady here seemed an excellent type of your Earthling women, and the meteoric iron in her necklace made a perfect focus for electric hypnosis. Her escort was too inferior a specimen to be of value to me so I killed him when he attempted to interfere. When you gave chase I lured you on until I could see whether you might be usable. You proved an excellent specimen, so I merely stunned you. Very soon now I shall be ready to send the two of you through the Gate to our scientists in Xoran.”

A cold wave of sheer horror swept over Gordon. It was impossible to doubt the stark and deadly menace promised in the plan of this grim visitor from an alien universe—a menace that loomed not only for Gordon

and Leah but for the teeming millions of a doomed and defenseless world.

“Let me show you Xoran,” Arlok offered. “Then you may be better able to understand.” He turned his back carelessly upon his two captives and strode over to the apparatus along the opposite wall.

Gordon longed to hurl himself upon the unprotected back of the retreating Xoranian, but he knew that any attempt of that kind would be suicidal. Arlok’s deadly tentacle would strike him down before he was halfway across the room.

He searched his surroundings with desperate eyes for anything that might serve as a weapon. Then his pulse quickened with sudden hope. There on a small table near Leah was the familiar bulk of a .45 calibre revolver, loaded and ready for use. It was included in a miscellaneous collection of other small earthly tools and objects that Arlok had apparently collected for study.

There was an excellent chance that Leah might be able to secure the gun unobserved. Gordon pressed her fingers in a swift attempt at signalling, then jerked his head ever so slightly toward the table. A moment later the quick answering pressure of Leah's fingers told him that she had understood his message. From the corner of his eye Gordon saw Leah's other hand begin cautiously groping behind her for the revolver.

Then both Gordon and Leah froze into sudden immobility as Arlok faced them again from beside an apparatus slightly reminiscent of an earthly radio set. Arlok threw a switch, and a small bank of tubes glowed pale green. A yard-square plate of bluish-gray metal on the wall above the apparatus glowed with milky fluorescence.

"It is easy to penetrate the barrier with light waves," Arlok explained. "That is a Gate that can readily be opened from either side. It was through it that we first discovered your Earth."

Arlok threw a rheostat on to more power. The luminous plate cleared swiftly. "And there, Earthlings, is Xoran!" Arlok said proudly.

Leah and Gordon gasped in sheer amaze as the glowing plate became a veritable window into another world—a world of utter and alien terror.

The livid light of a giant red sun blazed mercilessly down upon a landscape from which every vestige of animal and plant life had apparently been stripped. Naked rocks and barren soil stretched illimitably to the far horizon in a vast monotony of utter desolation.

Arlok twirled the knob of the apparatus, and another scene flashed into view. In this scene great gleaming squares and cones of metal rose in towering clusters from the starkly barren land. Hordes of creatures like Arlok swarmed in and around the metal buildings. Giant machines whirled countless wheels in strange tasks. From a thousand great needle-like projections on the buildings spurted shimmering sheets of crackling flame, bathing the entire scene in a whirling mist of fiery vapors.

Gordon realized dimly that he must be looking into one of the cities of Xoran, but every detail of the chaotic whirl of activity was too utterly unfamiliar to carry any real significance to his bewildered brain. He was as hopelessly overwhelmed as an African savage would be if transported suddenly into the heart of Times Square.

Arlok again twirled the knob. The scene shifted, apparently to another planet. This world was still alive, with rich verdure and swarming millions of people strangely like those of Earth. But it was a doomed world. The dread Gate to Xoran had already been opened here. Legions of bluish-gray Xorans were attacking the planet's inhabitants, and the attack of those metallic hosts was irresistible.

The slight bodies of the Xorans seemed as impervious to bullets and missiles as though armor-plated. The frantic defense of the beleaguered people of the doomed planet caused hardly a casualty in the Xoranic ranks.

The attack of the Xoranians was hideously effective. Clouds of dense yellow fog belched from countless projectors in the hands of the bluish-gray hosts, and beneath that deadly miasma all animal and plant life on the doomed planet was crumbling, dying, and rotting into a liquid slime. Then even the slime was swiftly obliterated, and the Xoranians were left triumphant upon a world starkly desolate.

“That was one of the minor planets in the swarm that make up the solar system of the sun that your astronomers call Canopus,” Arlok explained. “Our first task in conquering a world is to rid it of the unclean surface scum of animal and plant life. When this noxious surface mold is eliminated, the planet is then ready to furnish us sustenance, for we Xoranians live directly upon the metallic elements of the planet itself. Our bodies are of a substance of which your scientists have never even dreamed—deathless, invincible, living metal!”

Arlok again twirled the control of the apparatus and the scene was shifted back to the planet of Xoran, this time to the interior of what was apparently a vast



laboratory. Here scores of Xoranian scientists were working upon captives who were pathetically like human beings of Earth itself, working with lethal gases and deadly liquids as human scientists might experiment upon noxious pests. The details of the scene were so utterly revolting, the tortures that were being inflicted so starkly horrible, that Leah and Gordon sank back in their chairs sick and shaken.

Arlok snapped off a switch, and the green light in the tubes died. "That last scene was the laboratory to which I shall send you two presently," he said callously as he started back across the room toward them.

Gordon lurched to his feet, his brain a seething whirl of hate in which all thought of caution was gone as he tensed his muscles to hurl himself upon that grim monstrosity from the bleak and desolate realm of Xoran.

Then he felt Leah tugging surreptitiously at his right hand. The next moment the bulk of something cold and hard met his fingers. It was the revolver. Leah

had secured it while Arlok was busy with his inter-dimensional televisor.

Arlok was rapidly approaching them. Gordon hoped against hope that the menace of that deadly tentacle might be diverted for the fraction of a second necessary for him to get in a crippling shot. Leah seemed to divine his thought. She suddenly screamed hysterically and flung herself on the floor almost at Arlok's feet.

Arlok stopped in obvious wonder and bent over Leah. Gordon took instant advantage of the Xoranian's diverted attention. He whipped the revolver from behind him and fired point-blank at Arlok's unprotected head.

The bullet struck squarely, but Arlok was not even staggered. A tiny spot of bluish-gray skin upon his oval skull gleamed faintly for a moment under the bullet's impact. Then the heavy pellet of lead, as thoroughly flattened as though it had struck the triple armor of a battleship, dropped spent and harmless to the floor.

Arlok straightened swiftly. For the moment he seemed to have no thought of retaliating with his deadly tentacle. He merely stood there quite still with one thin arm thrown up to guard his glowing eyes.

Gordon sent the remainder of the revolver's bullets crashing home as fast as his finger could press the trigger. At that murderously short range the smashing rain of lead should have dropped a charging gorilla. But for all the effect Gordon's shots had upon the Xoranian, his ammunition might as well have been pellets of paper. Arlok's glossy hide merely, glowed momentarily in tiny patches as the bullets struck and flattened harmlessly—and that was all.

His last cartridge fired, Gordon flung the empty weapon squarely at the blue monstrosity's hideous face. Arlok made no attempt to dodge. The heavy revolver struck him high on the forehead, then rebounded harmlessly to the floor. Arlok paid no more attention to the blow than a man would to the casual touch of a wind-blown feather.

Gordon desperately flung himself forward upon the Xoranian in one last mad effort to overwhelm him. Arlok dodged Gordon's wild blows, then gently swept the Earth man into the embrace of his thin arms. For one helpless moment Gordon sensed the incredible strength and adamant hardness of the Xoranian's slender figure, together with an overwhelming impression of colossal weight in that deceptively slight body.

Then Arlok contemptuously flung Gordon away from him. As Gordon staggered backward, Arlok's tentacle lashed upward and levelled upon him. Its twin tips again glowed brilliant green and livid blue. Instantly every muscle in Gordon's body was paralyzed. He stood there as rigid as a statue, his body completely deadened from the neck down. Beside him stood Leah, also frozen motionless in that same weird power.

"Earthling, you are beginning to try my patience," Arlok snapped. "Can you not realize that I am utterly invincible in any combat with you? The living metal of my body weighs over sixteen hundred pounds, as you

measure weight. The strength inherent in that metal is sufficient to tear a hundred of your Earth men to shreds. But I do not even have to touch you to vanquish you. The electric content of my bodily structure is so infinitely superior to yours that with this tentacle-organ of mine I can instantly short-circuit the feeble currents of your nerve impulses and bring either paralysis or death as I choose.

“But enough of this!” Arlok broke off abruptly. “My materials are now ready, and it is time that I finished my work. I shall put you out of my way for a few hours until I am ready to send you through the Gate to the laboratories of Xoran.”

The green and blue fire of the tentacle’s tips flamed to dazzling brightness. The paralysis of Gordon’s body swept swiftly over his brain. Black oblivion engulfed him.

When Gordon again recovered consciousness he found that he was lying on the floor of what was apparently a narrow hall, near the foot of a stairway. His hands were lashed tightly behind him, and his

feet and legs were so firmly pinioned together that he could scarcely move.

Beside him lay Leah, also tightly bound. A short distance down the hall was the closed door of Arlok's work-room, recognizable by the thin line of red light gleaming beneath it.

Moonlight through a window at the rear of the hall made objects around Gordon fairly clear. He looked at Leah and saw tears glistening on her long lashes.

"Oh, Blair, I was afraid you'd never waken again," the girl sobbed. "I thought that fiend had killed you!" Her voice broke hysterically.

"Steady, darling," Gordon said soothingly. "We simply can't give up now, you know. If that monstrosity ever opens that accursed Gate of his our entire world is doomed. There must be some way to stop him. We've got to find that way and try it—even if it seems only one forlorn chance in a million."

Gordon shook his head to clear the numbness still lingering from the effect of Arlok's tentacle. The Xoranian seemed unable to produce a paralysis of any great duration with his weird natural weapon. Accordingly, he had been forced to bind his captives like two trussed fowls while he returned to his labors.

Lying close together as they were, it was a comparatively easy matter for them to get their bound hands within reach of each other, but after fifteen minutes of vain work Gordon realized that any attempt at untying the ropes was useless. Arlok's prodigious strength had drawn the knots so tight that no human power could ever loosen them.

Then Gordon suddenly thought of the one thing in his pockets that might help them. It was a tiny cigarette lighter, of the spring-trigger type. It was in his vest pocket completely out of reach of his bound hands, but there was a way out of that difficulty.

Gordon and Leah twisted and rolled their bodies like two contortionists until they succeeded in getting into such a position that Leah was able to get her teeth in

the cloth of the vest pocket's edge. A moment of desperate tugging, then the fabric gave way. The lighter dropped from the torn pocket to the floor, where Leah retrieved it.

Then they twisted their bodies back to back. Leah managed to get the lighter flaming in her bound hands. Gordon groped in an effort to guide the ropes on his wrists over the tiny flickering flame.

Then there came the faint welcome odor of smoldering rope as the lighter's tiny flame bit into the bonds. Gordon bit his lips to suppress a cry of pain as the flame seared into his skin as well. The flame bit deeper into the rope. A single strand snapped.

Then another strand gave way. To Gordon the process seemed endless as the flame scorched rope and flesh alike. A long minute of lancing agony that seemed hours—then Gordon could stand no more. He tensed his muscles in one mighty agonized effort to end the torture of the flame.



The weakened rope gave way completely beneath that pain-maddened lunge. Gordon's hands were free. It was an easy matter now to use the lighter to finish freeing himself and Leah. They made their way swiftly back to the window at the rear of the hall. It slid silently upward. A moment later, and they were out in the brilliant moonlight—free.

They made their way around to the front of the house. Behind the drawn shades of one of the front rooms an eery glow of red light marked the location of Arlok's work-room. They heard the occasional clink of tools inside the room as the Xoranian diligently worked to complete his apparatus.

They crept stealthily up to where one of the French windows of Arlok's work-room swung slightly ajar. Through the narrow crevice they could see Arlok's grotesque back as he labored over the complex assembly of apparatus against the wall.

A heavy stone flung through the window would probably wreck that delicate mechanism completely, yet the two watchers knew that such a respite would

be only a temporary one. As long as Arlok remained alive on this planet to build other gates to Xoran, Earth's eventual doom was certain. Complete destruction of Arlok himself was Earth's only hope of salvation.

The Xoranian seemed to be nearing the end of his labors. He left the apparatus momentarily and walked over to a work-bench where he picked up a slender rod-like tool. Donning a heavy glove to shield his left hand, he selected a small plate of bluish-gray metal, then pressed a switch in the handle of the tool in his right hand.

A blade of blinding white flame, seemingly as solid as a blade of metal, spurted for the length of a foot from the tool's tip. Arlok began cutting the plate with the flame, the blade shearing through the heavy metal as easily as a hot knife shears through butter.

The sight brought a sudden surge of exultant hope to Gordon. He swiftly drew Leah away from the window, far enough to the side that their low-voiced

conversation could not be heard from inside the work-room.

“Leah, there is our one chance!” he explained excitedly. “That blue fiend *is* vulnerable, and that flame-tool of his is the weapon to reach his vulnerability. Did you notice how careful he was to shield his other hand with a glove before he turned the tool on? He can be hurt by that blade of flame, and probably hurt badly.”

Leah nodded in quick understanding. “If I could lure him out of the room for just a moment, you could slip in through the window and get that flame-tool, Blair,” she suggested eagerly.

“That might work,” Gordon agreed reluctantly. “But, Leah, don’t run any more risks than you absolutely have to!” He picked up a small rock. “Here, take this with you. Open the door into the hall and attract Arlok’s attention by throwing the rock at his precious apparatus. Then the minute he sees you, try to escape out through the hall again. He’ll leave his work to follow you. When he returns to his work-room I’ll be

in there waiting for him. And I'll be waiting with a weapon that can stab through even that armor-plated hide of his!"

They separated, Leah to enter the house, Gordon to return to the window.

Arlok was back over in front of the apparatus, fitting into place the piece of metal he had just cut. The flame-tool, its switch now turned off, was still on the work-bench.

Gordon's heart pounded with excitement as he crouched there with his eyes fixed upon the closed hall door. The minutes seemed to drag interminably. Then suddenly Gordon's muscles tensed. The knob of the hall door had turned ever so slightly. Leah was at her post!

The next moment the door was flung open with a violence that sent it slamming back against the wall. The slender figure of Leah stood framed in the opening, her dark eyes blazing as she flung one hand up to hurl her missile.

Arlok whirled just as Leah threw the rock straight at the intricate Gate-opening apparatus. With the speed of thought the Xoranian flung his own body over to shield his fragile instruments. The rock thudded harmlessly against his metallic chest.

Then Arlok's tentacle flung out like a striking cobra, its forked tip flaming blue and green fire as it focussed upon the open door. But Leah was already gone. Gordon heard her flying footsteps as she raced down the hall. Arlok promptly sped after her in swift pursuit.

As Arlok passed through the door into the hall Gordon flung himself into the room, and sped straight for the work-bench. He snatched the flame-tool up, then darted over to the wall by the door. He was not a second too soon. The heavy tread of Arlok's return was already audible in the hall just outside.

Gordon prepared to stake everything upon his one slim chance of disabling that fearful tentacle before Arlok could bring it into action. He pressed the tiny

switch in the flame-tool's handle just as Arlok came through the door.

Arlok, startled by the glare of the flame-tool's blazing blade, whirled toward Gordon—but too late. That thin searing shaft of vivid flame had already struck squarely at the base of the Xoranian's tentacle. A seething spray of hissing sparks marked the place where the flame bit deeply home. Arlok screamed, a ghastly metallic note of anguish like nothing human.

The Xoranian's powerful hands clutched at Gordon, but he leaped lithely backward out of their reach. Then Gordon again attacked, the flame-tool's shining blade licking in and out like a rapier. The searing flame swept across one of Arlok's arms, and the Xoranian winced. Then the blade stabbed swiftly at Arlok's waist. Arlok half-doubled as he flinched back. Gordon shifted his aim with lightning speed and sent the blade of flame lashing in one accurate terrible stroke that caught Arlok squarely in the eyes.

Again Arlok screamed in intolerable agony as that tearing flame darkened forever his glowing eyes. In

berserker fury the tortured Xoranian charged blindly toward Gordon. Gordon warily dodged to one side. Arlok, sightless, and with his tentacle crippled, still had enough power in that mighty metallic body of his to tear a hundred Earth men to pieces.

Gordon stung Arlok's shoulder with the flame, then desperately leaped to one side just in time to dodge a flailing blow that would have made pulp of his body had it landed.

Arlok went stark wild in his frenzied efforts to come to grips with his unseen adversary. Furniture crashed and splintered to kindling wood beneath his threshing feet. Even the stout walls of the room shivered and cracked as the incredible weight of Arlok's body caromed against them.

Gordon circled lithely around the crippled blue monstrosity like a timber wolf circling a wounded moose. He began concentrating his attack upon Arlok's left leg. Half a dozen deep slashes with the searing flame—then suddenly the thin leg crumpled and broke. Arlok crashed helplessly to the floor.

Gordon was now able to shift his attack to Arlok's head. Dodging the blindly flailing arms of the Xoranian, he stabbed again and again at that oval-shaped skull.

The searing thrusts began to have their effect. Arlok's convulsive movements became slower and weaker. Gordon sent the flame stabbing in a long final thrust in an attempt to pierce through to that alien metal brain.

With startling suddenness the flame burned its way home to some unknown center of life force in the oval skull. There was a brief but appalling gush of bright purple flame from Arlok's eye-sockets and mouth orifice. Then his twitching body stiffened. His bluish-gray hide darkened with incredible swiftness into a dull black. Arlok was dead.

Gordon, sickened at the grisly ending to the battle, snapped off the flame-tool and turned to search for Leah. He found her already standing in the hall door, alive, and unhurt.



“I escaped through the window at the end of the hall,” she explained. “Arlok quit following me as soon as he saw that you too were gone from where he had left us tied.” She shuddered as she looked down at the Xoranian’s mangled body. “I saw most of your fight with him, Blair. It was terrible; awful. But, Blair, we’ve won!”

“Yes, and now we’ll make sure of the fruits of our victory,” Gordon said grimly, starting over toward the Gate-opening apparatus with the flame-tool in his hand. A very few minutes’ work with the shearing blade of flame reduced the intricate apparatus to a mere tangled pile of twisted metal.

Arlok, Gate-opener of Xoran, was dead—and the Gate to that grim planet was now irrevocably closed!

“Blair, do you feel it too, that eery feeling of countless eyes still watching us from Xoran?” There was frank awe in Leah’s half-whispered question. “You know Arlok said that they had watched us for centuries from their side of the barrier. I’m sure they’re

watching us now. Will they send another Opener of Gates to take up the work where Arlok failed?"

Gordon took Leah into his arms. "I don't know, dear," he admitted gravely. "They may send another messenger, but I doubt it. This world of ours has had its warning, and it will heed it. The watchers on Xoran must know that in the five hundred and forty years it would take their next messenger to get here, the Earth will have had more than enough time to prepare an adequate defense for even Xoran's menace. I doubt if there will ever again be an attempt made to open the Gate to Xoran."